

Reflections at the Library

Mount Angel Abbey

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The idea of a “view” for a visiting motorist, or a crow’s nest type of vantage point from the top of the building met with looks of incomprehension. The architecture invites and directs one to explore the beauties of the site. The ambulatory will direct one to the relationship of architecture and site. The viewer will then experience personal involvement in the quiet natural landscape and panorama.

This is how Aalto approaches the problem, and his thinking about the space in the building. A person entering the library will (on a clear day) see the most majestic elements of our view framed in the picture window of the browsing room. This will include the valley below and the Cascade Range crowned with Mt. Hood. Proceeding from this point, a person will enter a pleasant controlled space with an emphasis on quiet and disengagement.

As Mr. Aalto says, he is always in the agony of doubt and uncertainty until he sees the final product, until he sees, “if it works.”¹

—Father Barnabas Reasoner
Director
Mount Angel Abbey Library
March 1966

The theme of *Oz 30* is haptic space, or the touch that space has on us through intentional forms that moves our feelings, as we move about. I know a place where this is paramount. The library at Mount Angel Abbey provides such a sensory loading, which is what architecture can do. Here, place was made by a lamp, by the skylights, by the clerestory, and by the horizon so you read seriously in any position.

In June of 1984 Hunter (an architect) and Carolyn (a bookseller) were to be wed in Corvallis. I was in the ceremony. To make this work we drove the Saab 1,100 miles from San Diego to Oregon after work Thursday evening to arrive in time for the Friday afternoon rehearsal and dinner. A night ambling north through California's central valley on I-5 with the graveyard-shift truckers. There was way too much work in the office for a weekend away, but these were good friends, and Aalto's Mount Angel Abbey Library (1964–70) was only an hour away after the ceremony.

Alvar Aalto died 11 May 1976. I began at Cal Poly the following September. As architecture students of this era, we enjoyed Aalto's atmospheric control of light and virtuoso forms, although we had no idea how to really build anything. Nevertheless, it was easy to sympathetically enter his spaces through the drawings and photographs. A Modernist by instruction, era, and inclination, my fourth year of school was at the DIS program in Copenhagen, where field trips and ambition treated us to two dozen of his projects from Helsinki to Bremen, with



a surprising concentration around Wolfsburg, Germany (the VW town). Imagining back on this education the Villa Mairea (Noormarkku), the North Jutland Art Museum at Aalborg, the Säynätsalo City Hall, plus the Cultural Center of Wolfsburg stand out as compelling. In 1983 we toured on the Baker House at M.I.T. which was aging nicely. An affinity well wetted, I was keen to see the library and welcomed the good excuse: road trip.

The library sits prominently on a butte, the reading stacks looking north. After parking your approach is from the south across a lawn that is not quite a square. Our first move is to circumnavigate the building before entering,

getting the lay of the building in its landscape. What you see is the library vocabulary of Aalto: A fan shape composed to the rectilinear bar. I imagined a cross between the Wolfsburg Cultural Center with Säynätsalo Town Hall. The parti is plainly offered in a Modernist way as you walk around the library. A rectilinear volume of service (office and work rooms), entry, and a small lecture room stretch west to east filling the gap between the neighbors closing the campus' quad in a manner of context. An urban or public gesture that blocks the horizon, but sets up an interior sequence. The four finger (right hand palm up) fan shape of the stacks and reading area rotates towards due north aligning the arc of the

clerestory to the vault of the sun and restricts light northerly. Your thumb is in line with the service bar and the soft tissue between is the periodical rooms allowing deep views towards Mt. Hood and the Cascades.

One enters the Library moving north, below a classicist awning articulated by wood trimmed steel columns, to pass through a vestibule, to be greeted in the lobby (that doubles as a gallery) by Aalto lamps, round skylights, a second glazed wall, and beyond, the curvilinear librarians' station. The southerly light now behind you, shaded by the porch and entry, a skylight group over the desk highlights a foreground in human scale: a person



at the loan desk. The middle distance squeezes horizontal, sets pressure over head, your eyes instructed by the wood slats of the ceiling plane running away, towards the slatted end panels of the book stacks, radiating from a center that hovers just beyond the round counter top and librarian. Top light overhead is from the unseen arc of the clerestory that suggested by the structure setting one column before double columns beyond, opposite the opening to the lower floor. There is the offer of a place at the reading rail with a lamp. From this position, the entry floor is three risers higher than the main library floor, aligning the far windows just above your eye-level, providing a horizon of sky as the weather will have it, and trees. This composition, and more, casts you into a place of serious reading. It is a play

on perspective, a room with books, lit sacredly from above, entered on edge, as one frames a mind in ecclesiastical theater. This entry sequence is arranged for what today we call the moment. All of which combines the senses into an perceptual instant, that you may or may not be aware of, captured in a flicker of feeling imagination. A poetic image as Gaston Bachelard would have it, where all the senses are suspended in a moment's participation with the architect—which is the art of architecture, that transcendence made possible in haptic work and the goal of our best architects.

A person wonders how he accomplishes so much with so little. Part of the secret seems to lie in the wedding of function and design achieved by making the function be the design.²²

On this first visit, what followed was one of the most instructive, phenomenal architectural experiences of a young architect's education. There was a young monk at the front desk. We dressed in cameras and awe. I asked if it was okay for us to look around and take some pictures? You (he says without surprise) must be architects? Yes, how can you tell? Sure, look around. (I recognized a smile that must have been both pride and recognition of the building he worked in, and a touch of gentle mockery for us.) As we spoke I was scanning the room and listening to his tenor. I asked how he liked the building. He became somber saying that it was functionally outstanding since he could command the entire library from his desk position. However, "the light inside is too gray." As his voice vibrated, my panorama confirmed his assessment. Oregon's north light, even dressed in spring blue, filtered in like a cloudy day. I felt a twang of disappointment in the master's failure by agreeing with the librarian's criticism. But only for an instant, as my perspective set upon a novice, in white gown, sitting at the reading rail, apparently having brought his book to the light, concentrating, reading in a bubble of yellow incandescent light below his lamp. A little warm space inside a somber room. Sensational: what presence of mind, what creative impulse, orchestrated this inhabitable consequence? Aalto.

I have been haunted since by this aesthetic event of the neophyte in a incandescent halo, studying under a gray light. It is a lesson in the condition

of light. Knowing how hard it is to step in the same river twice, nonetheless, on the intent of this piece, we went back to the Library at Mount Angel Abbey last month to confirm our original impressions. And it is all still there, in fine repair (with minor substitutions for the ubiquitous ADA laws). The constructed moment, the poetic impulse are still present and palpable after twenty-four years of my own practice and teaching. The lessons are always there if we observe our masters. Palpable space can be built, then given away, with the right relationships

Architecture is something more than mere building. This something more is the gift of experience, the creative trafficking between an architect's deliberateness and the presence of inhabitability. Some named this flickering presence behind the construction the "poetics of architecture." I like this turn of phrase. It points every finger back towards the ethics of the architect. It is a way of naming the aesthetic, the feelings she wants to give away; "to express" as Louis Kahn would say. At Mount Angel Alvar Aalto realized that this was a library—he liked making libraries—for serious concentration. He said, "I try to get light which spreads in the room so that no matter at which angle you hold the book there will never be hard reflection in your eyes."²³ His ethical calculation is for people to read unhampered in any bodily position. In a room justly cut off from distractions, noise, and vistas, but lit from above. Elsewhere there are rooms for looking out, like the periodical room, work rooms, offices,



or the private carrels. Serious study defining the rule, the two main floors have three minor views out from the stacks in alignment with the structure, separating the four fanning volumes, glimpsing the horizon. Asked why he did not have larger glass areas to make the most of the magnificent views, he replied, "I have designed a place of study, not a lounge."⁴ Monastic study is elevated by a spiritual light from above. Whether at a carrel, a chair by the stacks, or a position on the rail, one is always in conditioned illumination with the pleasure of a lamp.

As our best architects demonstrate, light—the ordering of mood—is the essence of architecture. Mood is the architect's artistic medium. Mood, in broader terms atmosphere, is created by a rule that light must bounce or touch something before it is given to the eye. Inherently everyone understands this: the theater owner, the retailer, or the star-struck lovers at a candlelight dinner. Yet how can you give a whole library the feeling of concentration, meditation, focus and reverence, on this escarpment? I visualize the whole history of Modern architecture: Mr. Wright's concealed lamps and deep recessed windows; Le Corbusier's light cannons at the church of La Tourette; Louis Kahn's natural light fixtures at the Kimbell Art Museum; or, most poignantly, Alvar Aalto's technique of vertical wood slats over the windows at the Wolfsburg Cultural Center or Säynätsalo City Hall. It was at the Säynätsalo City Hall that the quantum mechanics of this lesson was first demonstrated to me.

Our Cal Poly studio was there on a late September's day in the glory of horizontal Finnish sunlight. Yet inside the main hallway the light was warm. I walk outside again: cool. Inside: warm. How? I approached the window, and as you got within a few inches of the glass, between the exterior wood slats the light was cool, but step back a bit and the space was warm. That this gentle touch of a few too widely spaced wood slats, set on edge to the window, could give such charity taught us much. If light is the medium of the architect's art, then its conditioning is the technique.

Finland in the long cold winter is overcast and much like Oregon in its dark, dour days. Mr. Aalto has long been concerned with keeping his buildings light and cheerful. The circular designs on the plans are skylights. The tipped roofline on the north side is a light scoop around the perimeter of the top floor. It is a cheerful experience to enter an Aalto building on a gloomy day. The light on the perimeter gives an atmosphere of light, a feeling of coming-into-the-light not a going out of it. The central part of the building has this same effect through the round overhead porthole. It adds a dimension of interest to usually dead space. There is an element of wonderment in the charm of an Aalto interior.⁵

At Mount Angel the rule of light is conditioned in several ways, depending generally on a room's intent. (Aalto's conceptual regulations are given some breath by the architect's team.) At the





main level stacks and the central reading areas light is brought in through large, dark metal window frames and reflected off interior plaster bevels painted white. The white seems tinged cool, or such is my perception from the cast shadows and shade. The clerestory and horizontal windows in the four finger volumes of the stacks, have well spaced vertical wood trims articulating the facade (upper level) of a color that matures the light. At the lower level stacks, the staff offices, and work spaces the exterior is identified by a tightly spaced wood screen that brings in light at a more personal scale. The auditorium is a special case combining two screened apertures at opposite corners with a reflective ceiling bevel and curtains. Also playing independently is the periodical room, which has picture windows facing east to the mountains, tempered only by sheer fabric curtains. It must be spectacular on a clear day to see white-hatted Mt. Hood (and partners) reflecting the sunset. Given the interior glass between the periodicals and the main level stacks and reading area, this vista penetrates deep, all the way to the librarian's office and the front loan-desk. A particular incident of sunlight occurs at the lower level carrels, which are private rooms. Here the light is seasoned by the wood trellis and delivered to a studying monk (at a desk lamp) after being used in the carrel. Taken in sum the various methods of tempering the light give an atmosphere to study privately, while at the same time being in the Pacific northwest.

The section, we say, is the architect's drawing. It is where interior space, pro-

gram and the vault of the sky intersect within the mind's eye. It is the drawing that stands for the architect. A gnomon, standing in light casts its shadow, as we do. The gnomon has been part of our trade since at least the Greeks, likely since the Incas. In legacy Modern architects like Le Corbusier, Wright, and Aalto acknowledged whole buildings standing in the sun like a gnomon. In second-year we learn that plan and section are connected in critique, at Mount Angel Abbey we learn they are inseparable. Light is conditioned both from above and the horizon.

Alvar Aalto had three distinctive careers (in sequence): regional Nordic Classicist; C.I.A.M. card-carrying Modernist; and after about 1945, a synthesis of the two. The mature work of this period might be what Kenneth Frampton calls "Critical Regionalism," a combination of intentions that are both regionally place oriented and yet participates globally, or internationally in style as Modernism wished. The Mount Angel Abbey Library is such a place where the Nordic sky finds purchase in dull light of the Oregon foothills, as the parti, materials, roof sections, and site planning allow. While he simultaneously celebrates the universal humanity of being with a book as the common details judiciously imported from Europe demonstrate. Father Barnabas must have understood this too when he invited Aalto to the project in 1963.

Much can be observed by visiting the building, but if good understanding is so available, then why is it that so few



buildings live up to this litmus? The most remarkable circumstance about the atmospheric beauty of the Mount Angel Library is that although Alvar Aalto designed the project, he only visited the site once in 1967 for two days. Such a remote control triumph gives hope to architects that sensational building can be team play.

In 1964 Alvar Aalto (at 67) was a renowned, renowned architect in declining health. Having every intention to build for the Benedictine Monks, but without a license to practice in Oregon, he designed a team of colleagues from his time at M.I.T. He tendered a young Finnish associate, Erik Vartiainen, a University of California graduate, as his liaison and local representative. He suggested Vernon DeMars firm (Berkeley) as the architect of record (a close friend from M.I.T. where they shared an office). Everyone involved understood it was to be an Aalto building, and Aalto's Helsinki office oversaw all aspects of the design including fixtures and the furniture. As the method, sketches from Aalto passed through office chief Kaarlo Leppanen, to Eric Vartiainen (and his assistant John Ridgewell), to have the work again reviewed by Aalto. Vartiainen worked at all resolute venues, the Helsinki office, DeMars firm in Berkeley, and was at the job site throughout construction. Father Reasoner counsels this plan to the Abbey:

Eric will be here [Mount Angel] in June [1966] with the plans. Following presentation of these plans, Eric will proceed to Berkeley where he will guide them through the engineer-

ing at the firm of DeMars and Well. Before the engineering is too far advanced but advanced far enough for accurate estimate of building costs, these will be presented to us. Bids will be let locally. Eric will supervise the building construction.

The Aaltos will be here as soon as his doctor will authorize travel. His office thinks in terms of a time following Eric's visit. Mr. Aalto will be here several times according to the way his office envisions it. It is his usual procedure. I think the provision "if his health permits" might be in order.

In his present projects, Mr. Aalto's work is spread from the Arctic Circle to Bagdad, through Finland, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Lebanon and America. Building at a distance is difficult. For Aalto it is not unusual. Mr. DeMars comments that part of Aalto's great reputation is that he gets buildings completed.⁶

Aalto's mature work assembles forms, ideas, details, feelings and talent in ways practiced during his lifetime. Such practical knowledge is generally transferable, to a willing recipient, as it was here through skilled hands. Eric Vartiainen, by working closely with all concerned and in the practiced techniques, forms, and details of Aalto's libraries plays the construction to the rule of light. I have seen such successes before in great buildings where a young architect from the office plays front man for a project. Rudolph Schindler for Frank Lloyd Wright at the Holly-

hock House; Jack MacAllister for the office Louis Kahn at the Salk Institute; and David van Handel for Tod Williams and Billie Tsien at the Neurosciences Institute, are three that come to mind. Such apprentice-like learning is an architectural tradition that bears earnest spaces.

As an apprentice (licensed, with an office, but a rookie) seeing the Library at Mount Angel Abbey for the first time I marveled at Aalto's forms, the spread of light, felt his spaces, noted his techniques, and hoped to borrow something of the magic. The experience confirmed the possibility of palpable space as our own professional goal. This recent visit offers other lessons not so much different as additive. For instance architectural practice teaches us that relationships build buildings. Haptic or aesthetic spaces, the art of architecture, emerges out of the genius of design, but it is transmitted through a practice of shared awareness and intentions to be played out in the complex orchestra of construction, such that in finality it gives a gift of mood: of light. The architecture of a building, the something more the architect brings, lies beyond the drawings, computer images, and models like a poem lies beyond its words, a movie beyond its image, a story behind its text. Architecture is made by people and light.

Notes

1. Father Barnabas Reasoner. "Library Bulletin, Helsinki Report, March 8–18, 1966" from "Helsinki Report—A visit with Alvar Aalto" at <http://www.mtangel.edu/library/main/helsinki.html>.
2. Op. cit.
3. Alvar Aalto quoted in *Lasting Aalto Masterwork: The Library at Mount Angel Abbey*, by Donald Canty. Published by Mount Angel Abbey, St. Benedict, Oregon, 1992: 29.
4. Op. cit., 29.
5. Father Barnabas Reasoner. "Helsinki Report—A Visit with Alvar Aalto."
6. Ibid.

